Bishop James Whelan, O.P.:
College President in Somerset and Second Bishop of Nashville,
While Passing Through and Returning to Zanesville
by Anthony J. Lisska, Denison University
(Concluded, from Vol. XXVIII, No. 7)

Whelan as Pro-Union

That Whelan was pro-Union in sympathy and commitment, as so many historical references suggest, is not open for debate. Yet documents do suggest that indeed Whelan attempted to care for his flock during the terrible days of the Civil War in Nashville. Bishop Spalding of Louisville, writing to Archbishop Purcell on January 11, 1862, remarks that he is in dire need for Chaplains to serve with the troops in the Civil War and also to minister in the hospitals. Spalding further notes that "Bishop James Whelan of Nashville passed through en route to Cincinnati and the East and mentioned the need of another priest among the confederates at Bowling Green, Kentucky." Spalding tells Purcell that "he asked Whelan to bring back a Dominican Father," presumably from Whelan's trip to the East. Nashville itself suffered greatly from the invasion of the Federal troops, led by General Buell in February, 1862. Stritch suggests that the "terrible blunder" to which D'Arco refers is not alcohol related, but rather a sermon Whelan preached just as the union army reached the outskirts of Nashville. Several historical sources refer to this event. Stritch suggests that this sermon backfired terribly. Whelan appears to have told those in attendance at the cathedral for a liturgical service that whatever might happen as the Federal army approached, they must put their trust in God and in Divine Providence and not ever forget their Catholic religion. This sermon was perceived by many in attendance—and then by those throughout the city who later heard of this sermon—as being substantially pro-Union and thus anti-Confederate. Whatever Whelan may have intended through this sermon, it appears that the fallout was fast and furious. From then on it seems that Whelan's days as a functioning episcopal leader of a major Southern city were numbered indeed.

In the June 1863 letter from Kenrick to Purcell noted above, Kenrick suggests to Purcell that it might be best not to fill the vacant see of Little Rock. The gist of this letter, as contained in the archive file, suggests that a northerner would not fare well as the episcopal shepherd of a southern diocese. The narrative of Kenrick's letter goes as follows:

Kenrick does not think it advisable to make any nomination for the see of Little Rock. Whoever is appointed ought to be there, or free to go there without exposing himself to any inconvenience condition such as would render his ministry liable to distrust on the part of his diocesans. Hence, no clergyman should be chosen from any of the northern or border states.

This observation exhorting caution by Kenrick is more than likely an implied reference to the
problems Whelan faced as a northerner serving as the Bishop of a major southern city with its accompanying diocese.

Friendship with General Rosecrans

Several historical sources state unequivocally that Whelan and the Rosecrans brothers—the Bishop and the Union General—were friends, probably from their days together in Ohio. Commenting on Rosecrans's Catholicity, Stritch writes as follows:

Rosecrans was a devout Catholic who wore a crucifix in plain view over his uniform, and carried a rosary in his pocket... He surrounded himself with devout Catholics as far as possible; his adjutant-general, Julius Garesche, came from a well-known Cincinnati Catholic family, one of whom, Father Edward Garesche, was a well-known Jesuit writer of the 1920s. Julius was killed in a bizarre mischance when his head was blown off by a stray cannon ball as he rode with General Rosecrans near Murfreesboro. When his body was recovered he was found clutching a copy of The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. Not even the Confederate General, Episcopal Bishop Leonidas Polk, was as conspicuously religious.26

Stritch also notes that Bishop Whelan appears to have enjoyed fairly broad travel access throughout his diocese. There is an extant letter from a Holy Cross priest, Father Peter Paul Cooney, who was stationed earlier at the University of Notre Dame but was then the chaplain of the 35th Indiana Regiment. Cooney writes that he and Whelan traveled along with the Federal Army from Bowling Green, Kentucky, to Nashville. Arriving in Nashville, Father Cooney said the Sunday Mass in Whelan's cathedral and Father Henry Brown, the chaplain of the Irish Confederate Regiment of Nashville, preached the sermon on this occasion. Whelan is said to have remarked that this illustrated a wonderful example of Roman Catholic unity across divisional lines during the terrible war of rebellion. For in the Cathedral of his see city, Whelan witnessed a Union Army chaplain singing the Mass and a Confederate Army chaplain in the pulpit in front of a mostly rebel congregation.

Several letters to Archbishop Purcell, moreover, also note that Whelan appeared to have rather wide-ranging freedoms to travel easily across military lines. John Quinlan, the Bishop of Mobile, writing Purcell on October 19, 1861,
suggests that "Bishop Whelan may know a safe way to get it [a new Ordo] to Cincinnati," one presumes to the office of Archbishop Purcell. Quinlan also notes that he would travel to Nashville and let Whelan serve as the "unofficial" postal carrier indicating how carrying letters across the battle lines to the North from the South might be accomplished. He writes that he "would take any letters of Bishop Whelan to be sent north [and that] perhaps he can take the Ordo safely across the line." Whelan appears to have been known for his ability to travel across the military lines with a certain degree of impunity.

Stritch also ponders the question regarding why Whelan was singled out for his Union sympathies when other prominent Nashville citizens with stronger pro-Union allegiances were pretty much left alone. Stritch writes that the most prominent Catholic layperson in Nashville, Michael Burns, was very much pro-Union. Another prominent non-Catholic layman, Judge John M. Lea, held similar positions. There was an active social life between the young Nashville women and the Federal officers, in particular. Stritch wonders what went wrong and why such animosity was directed at Whelan on these matters. As Stritch notes, none of these activities by themselves suggests an adequate reason why Whelan became so isolated in Nashville. One may never know precisely what all these reasons were.

Events Following Whelan's Resignation

Written evidence suggests that Whelan remained in Nashville for nearly a year after Rome accepted his resignation. His Dominican colleague, Father Kelly, assumed the office of administrator of the Diocese and moved to the Bishop's residence in Nashville, which had been vacated by Whelan in July 1863. Even after Kelly's arrival, Whelan would not leave the Nashville area. Stritch notes that it is unclear why he stayed on so long. Whelan had moved his mother from New York City to be with him in Nashville; Stritch wonders if possibly she got involved and muddied the waters on this issue. Certainly Whelan would have been a proud man now sitting in disgrace. Was he too humiliated to return to his brother Dominicans in the north where he had been earlier Provincial, President of St. Joseph's College, friend of bishops, theologian at national conferences and certainly one of the famous orators and preachers in the Roman Catholic world in the United States? Nonetheless, in early 1864, Whelan appears to have sent his mother back to New York and he himself finally prepared to leave Nashville. However, Whelan did not report to St. Joseph's Priory near Somerset until April 1866. That he endured serious humiliation would probably be an understatement.

Kelly came to Nashville from St. Peter's Dominican parish in Memphis. It would seem that Kelly found himself in a most difficult situation, attempting to run the diocese while his friend and colleague, the now disposed bishop, would not leave the diocese. Kelly, nonetheless, accomplished several important things for the Diocese of Nashville. He established an orphanage for children, assisted the religious sisters in the diocese, and brought a sense of direction and purpose to the diocese that had been rudderless for the last year or so in which Whelan had remained the sitting bishop. Kelly did, as Stritch notes, hold the Diocese together under these trying times. Several American ecclesiastical leaders assumed that Kelly would be named Whelan's successor. He would then become the third straight Dominican to serve as bishop of the Diocese of Nashville. But that was not to be the case. Rome named a young Irish priest from St. Louis, Patrick Feehan, to succeed Whelan. Yet Feehan was not anxious to leave his home in St. Louis and assume the reins of a diocese in disarray. He
delayed his coming to Nashville for nearly a year. Rome appears to have wanted him there desperately, so it was prepared to wait until he was ready. Feehan had come to St. Louis from Ireland with his family, was ordained by Archbishop Kenrick in St. Louis, and had taught in Kenrick’s seminary there. It is obvious nearly a century and a half later that Feehan was Kenrick’s handpicked successor for Nashville. At first, Feehan appears to have declined this appointment to Nashville, but he finally yielded. On November 1, 1865, Feehan was consecrated, like Whelan six years earlier, in Kenrick’s St. Louis Cathedral. Father Kelly, always loyal to what duty demanded of him, journeyed to St. Louis for the consecration and returned to Nashville with the new bishop and, it appears, helped set him up in office. Then Kelly returned to St. Peter’s in Memphis where he served once again for several years. He became a local hero during the severe yellow fever epidemics in the 1870s. He appears not to have moped about not becoming a bishop either on this or later occasions, even though it also appears that his name was sent forward several times as a possible candidate for a vacant bishopric. Feehan stayed in Nashville for fifteen years, and then in 1880 he was named the first Archbishop of Chicago, where he served an illustrious ecclesiastical career.

Whelan Returns to Ohio

Whelan returned to St. Joseph’s Priory near Somerset, the place where he had exhibited such talent ten years earlier. He appears to have led somewhat a secluded life in Ohio, first in Somerset and later in Zanesville. Father O’Daniel writes that in Zanesville, Whelan was a popular priest, regaining his earlier fame as an engaging preacher. He seemed to have developed what a later century would refer to as "good people skills." O’Daniel notes that he wrote several historical articles; however, none of these have been discovered in preparation of this biographical essay. At the close of the First Vatican Council in 1869, the council that defined the doctrine of papal infallibility, Whelan wrote a small book explicating both the theological history and the justification for this newly defined doctrine. Titled *Catena Aurea*, this book is easily read and demonstrates the wide-ranging learning that Whelan possessed. He also developed and patented a new method for

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**Fig. 1.**

A figure from Whelan’s patent application. Sulfuric acid and salt in retort (A) formed chlorine, which was (B) purified in water and (C) passed over sulfuric acid. Gas holder (D) held quick lime to dry the gas and had a glass lid, through which light would "reduce the gas to an allotropic state." The gas was used to surround and preserve the corpse.
embalming. It is unclear from any documents consulted in undertaking the research for this biographical study how much scientific knowledge Whelan possessed.

At the young age of fifty-five, James Whelan died in Zanesville at half-past one early in the morning of February 18, 1878. The obituary in the Catholic Columbian notes that "the cause of his death was a stroke of paralysis." The notice reports that Whelan's mother still resided in New York, where she returned from Nashville a dozen years earlier. The obituary notes explicitly Whelan's "unusual talents and executive abilities." We get a small glimpse of how Whelan spent his time in Ohio after the less than stellar Episcopal career; he "returned to Ohio to spend his days in quiet, and in the pursuit of literary and scientific studies, of which he was passionately fond." Commenting further on his intellectual gifts, the obituary reads as follows:

His grasping mind, wonderful memory and aptitude for study, made him a man of deep erudition. In fact he had scarcely a peer in this country as a historian, and in theology or the natural and physical sciences, he stood amongst the foremost.

Of course, there is the customary degree of hyperbole in this obituary. Yet the emphasis is on the deepening of the intellectual life to which Whelan appears to have given himself once he returned to Ohio. One finds, however, no evidence of his historical work, about which the writer of the tribute speaks so assuredly. There is evidence of his scientific work with the new method for embalming, and his theological talents were used in the historical treatment of papal infallibility. Yet this treatise on infallibility, when read more than a century later, is more a descriptive account of who said what rather than a theological exegesis or argued defense. Whelan was buried from his beloved St. Joseph Church in Somerset and laid to rest in the community cemetery.

### Appraisal of Whelan's Career

What is one to make of the ecclesiastical career of James Whelan? Stritch, recalling the comments of Whelan's Dominican friend, Father D'Arco, suggests that indeed Whelan "was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time." As Stritch also notes, this indeed was a sad fate for one as exceptionally talented as Whelan. Stritch suggests that Whelan "was an oddball, and oddballs don't make good administrators."

This is, I think, too harsh a judgment. Whelan was very talented, as most every record indicates. It may well have been the case that he was not cut out for administrative work. It is a sad commentary that the American Dominicans in the nineteenth century did not have institutional uses for their talented scholars. These men were for the most part missionary priests in a new nation that was chronically short of priests. Edward Fenwick himself, the founder of the American Dominicans, brought this characteristic of missionary zeal to his followers. Unlike the American Jesuits of the time with several colleges and universities in the United States, the Dominicans had a short-lived history of three colleges located in remote rural areas that never achieved sustained success. Intellectually talented personnel can best contribute to the religious commonweal through institutional positions such as on college faculties. That the American Dominicans lacked these institutional means is a sad commentary on the followers of St. Dominic, who earlier had their priories associated with the major intellectual centers of Western Europe. It would not be until Father Lawrence Kearney became provincial that the Dominican House of Studies, in 1905, would move to Washington, D.C. and that Kearney would establish in Columbus what was known as St. Patrick's College. The institution in Columbus, despite acquiring a university charter in 1911, would never develop
into a college but remained a secondary school for sixty years, known as Aquinas College High School, and closed in 1965. Providence College in the capital city of Rhode Island began in 1918 and remains today as the only secular academic institution sponsored, staffed and administered by American Dominicans.

I suggest that part of the tragedy of James Whelan is that the American Dominicans did not know what to do with him. He probably should have been a member of a college or university faculty where his richly endowed intellectual talents could have been used to completion. Certainly the evidence suggests that upon his return to Ohio from Nashville, he gave himself almost tirelessly to the pursuit of knowledge. Yet the clergy-poor United States chose him to be a bishop and serve as an administrator in a capacity for which he appears to have been at best poorly suited and at worst unable to perform.

Postscript

The influence for the development of Catholicism in Tennessee is less well known than the narrative of the historical influence of the sons of St. Dominic in Ohio and Kentucky. Stritch writes eloquently of that important work for American Catholicism in the first half of the nineteenth century. This essay merely hints at the earlier work of Bishop Miles and notes only in passing the commitment of several other Dominican men and women to apostolic work in Tennessee. Nonetheless, the historical contributions were immense. For instance, the 1853 Catholic Almanac noted that in addition to Bishop Miles, among the nine priests serving in Tennessee, five were Dominicans. Speaking on the occasion of the centenary of the Diocese of Nashville, a son of Tennessee but then Bishop of Little Rock, Bishop John B. Morris, expressed this gratitude to the American Dominicans:

One cannot speak of the Diocese of Nashville without speaking of the Dominicans, because they were for a long time almost the only missionaries in the state, and the diocese is more indebted to the Fathers of St. Dominic for its Catholic life than to any other source whatever."

Responding to this expression of praise to the American Dominicans for their significant work in Tennessee, Stritch writes "Amen to that!"

Historical Sources

An earlier account of the life of Bishop James Whelan was presented at the Fall 2000 meeting of the Catholic Record Society in Columbus. The author is grateful to Fr. Luke Tancrell for suggestions to the earlier draft and to Don Schlegel for finding additional source material. Fr. Ambrose McAlister, a Columbus native and alumnus of Aquinas College High School and now Professor Emeritus at Providence College, kindly made digital copies of materials from the Provincial Archives located in the library of Providence College. The Archivist of the Provincial Archives graciously provided access to the file on Bishop Whelan. Marianne Lisska kindly used her vast proof reading talents to render the prose of this essay more readable.

One always begins any narrative on Dominican activity in the nineteenth century by consulting the work of Fathers Victor O'Daniel and Reginald Coffey. The recently published Project OPUS book, Dominicans at Home in a Young Nation: 1786-1865, Volume 1 of The Order of Preachers in the United States: A Family History, edited by Mary Nona McGreal, O.P., is a striking addition to this important historical narrative. Thomas Stritch's The Catholic Church in Tennessee: The Sesquicentennial Story is a valuable account of the first two Bishops of the Diocese of Nashville. The author is indebted to his former Denison University student, Patrick Hughes, who graciously sent a copy of Stritch's marvelous history of Catholicism in Tennessee together with copies of
other archival materials from the Diocese of Nashville Archives. John Gilmary Shea's Volume IV of his massive history of Catholicism provides at most a descriptive account of Whelan's term in Nashville with little explanation of this complicated situation. The important archival material on Whelan from the University of Notre Dame's impressive collection is available through Internet searches.

NOTES
23) Stritch notes that the foremost historian of Tennessee Catholicism, Monsignor George Flanigen, asserts this claim. Cf. Pp. 144-145.
24) University of Notre Dame Archives, file on 1862.
25) University of Notre Dame Archives, file on 1863.
26) Stritch, p. 145.
27) University of Notre Dame Archives, file on 1861.
28) Referring to Father Kelly, Stritch notes that "both historians of the Dominicans in the United States, Father Victor O'Daniel and Father Reginald Coffey, call him a great man." [Op. cit., p. 163]. This is undoubtedly correct. One hopes that eventually a biography of this talented Dominican Friar will be written and published.
30) Stritch, p. 146.
31) Ibid.
32) Stritch, p. 165

Mt. Calvary Cemetery, Columbus
Cathedral Section C, Lot Records, 1867-1926
(Continued, from Vol. XXVIII, No. 7)

121-C front [i.e. what could have been numbered lot 142]
p. 406, Wm. J. Byrne, 1020 East Broad St., 1898 Nov. 15, one lot in section C.
Transferred to Frank C. Schirtzinger on Oct. 31, 1932.
(Son) Robert Adolph Schirtzinger 1910 + 1932
(Father) Frank G. Schirtzinger 1877 + 1952
(Mother) Maria Schirtzinger 1880 + 1937
(Father) Bernard F. Schirtzinger 1907 + 1953
(Mother) Marian C. Schirtzinger 1914 + 1980

122 and 141-C
Olive M. Roberts 1862-1968
Olive G. Roberts 1848-1932
Theodore Roberts 1876-1918
George E. Roberts 1847-1913
Theodora Roberts 1887-1969

123-C south
James C. Graessle Ohio Mach 154 Field Arty 37
Div January 23, 1935

Robert J. Leonard 1863-1932
Catherine Leonard 1871-1944
Theodore Leonard II 1853-1928
Margaret A. Leonard 1850-1902
Edith R. Leonard 1879-1950
Albert Leonard 1861-1874
Elizabeth Sparrow Leonard 1886-1891
Hannah M. Brentnall Leonard, Derbyshire, England 1821-1903
Theodore Leonard 1820-1887
Catherine Leonard 1821-1854
Matilda Leonard Boyd 1847-1922
Fred William Graessle Ohio Chf-Radioman
USNRF August 16, 1933

123-C north
p. 402, Nicholas Court, Oak St., 1898 Jan. 10, lot 123 north half transferred by James Barry.
Grave: 1901 Sept. 9 child.
BARRY [Entrance stone from ante-1898]

124-C north
p. 35, William Barrett, 2512 First Ave (8/15/05), 1870 Dec. 9, lot 124 north half.
p. 35, Mrs. Michael Visconti, 445 Bolivar St., Dec. 10, 1910 two graves purchased and one dug.
M. Visconti 1881-1910
Fortunato Rubenio DiPietro Nato Maccio 8, 1894
Morto Febbraio 21, 1911 S.F.P. in M.P.

124-C south
p. 68, Mrs. Ellen McCarthy, 1870 Dec. 1, lot 124 south half. Graves: 1876 May 21; 1879 Aug. 23. [no stones]

125 and 138-C
(Mother) 1833-1899
Belle M. Lilley, dau. of Tho's & Mary Miller died Mar. 18, 1887, aged 24 y 5 m 11 d. Sacred Heart of Jesus I implore, Make me love Thee more and more.
Mary A. Miller wife of Thomas Miller, died Oct. 3, 1899
Thomas Miller died July 15, 1879, aged 62 y's 3 mo & 4 ds.
Cecilia Fanning nee Miller 1850-1916 Her children shall rise and call her blessed.
+ John C. Snee 1845-1912

Sarah Miller Snee 1857-1942 Waiting for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.
Filler: Dudley A. Apr. 22, 1936
Clara M. Apr. 11, 1936
Captain Richard J. Fanning 1846-1929 I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith.
Mary M. Fanning 1878-1941 Blessed are the dead who died in the Lord.
Cecil Fanning 1880-1931 "We pass through tribulation To the Isle of Understanding," C.F.
"He is dead, the sweet musician!
He the sweetest of all singers!
He has gone from us forever, He has moved a little nearer to the Master of all Music, to the Master of all singing!
O, my Brother!"
(Father) John McCarty 1845 + 1928
(Mother) Margaret T. McCarty 1848-1913
(Brother) E. Gleeson McCarty 1890 + 1918
(Brother) Thomas Miller McCarty 1876 + 1952
(Brother) James Chapman McCarty 1883 + 1955
(Brother) John McCarty 1886 + 1964
(Sister) Margaret W. McCarty 1878 + 1964
(Brother) James E. Miller 1868-1900

126-C north
p. 103, Mrs. Patrick Melvin "or Melville", 665 Harrison Ave., 1873 Oct 16, lot 126 north half.
Graves: 1878 Apr. 17 child; 1879 Apr. 2; 1881 Sept. 25; 1898 Nov. 24; 1911 Sept. 21; 1911 Nov. 26; 1925 Aug. 31. [no stones]

126-C south
p. 44, Sarah A. McBride, later John F. McClure, 1874 July 27, lot 126 south half.
Graves: 1890 Sept. 1; 1925 July 5; 1927 May 16.
Sara A. McBride Aug. 14, 1832 - Aug. 31, 1890
Elizabeth Auburn died Jan. 8, 1871 aged 60 y 8 m 3 d. Not dead but sleepeoth.

127-C east
p. 72, Patrick McGraioity [sic], 518 W.
(Father) Thomas E. Lynch 1859 + 1930  
(Mother) Mary E. Lynch 1863 + 1927  
Joseph F. Lynch 1893 + 1915  
(Infant Daughter) Patricia Mary Harrison Apr. 15, 1964 - Apr. 16, 1964

127-C west  
p. 427, John Murphy, 21 North Mitchell St., 1901 Nov. 5, five graves in lot 127 west half. Graves: 1901 Nov. 5; 1926 Apr. 26.  
(Father) John Murphy died Jan. 11, 1905 aged 68 years  
(Mother) Ann Boland Murphy died Nov. 4, 1901 aged 53 years  
(Brother) Mathew J. Murphy died Apr. 24, 1926 aged 54 years May his soul rest in peace.

128-C east  

128-C west  
Daniel Kirwan died Jan. 23, 1893 aged 59 years  
Catherine Kirwan 1827-1915  
Margaret Kirwan 1863-1920  
Philip A. Kirwan Aug. 3, 1861 - May 26, 1899  
Mary Kirwan Mar. 10, 1855 - Jan. 15, 1873  
James Kirwan Mar. 18, 1871 - Mar. 18, 1873

129-C east  
(Mother) Bridget McGrath May 25, 1834 - Sept. 13, 1921

129-C west  
p. 64, John Keenan, 1874 Aug. 17[?], lot 129 west half.  
p. 417, John J. Keenan, 1051 Summit St., 1874 Aug. 17, lot 129 west half. Graves: 1900 Sept. 8 child; 1903 March 31 to removal of 2 children to German [i.e. to Holy Cross half of cemetery]; 1908 Sept. 13; 1929? Dec. 27.  
(Father) John J. Keenan 1832-1908  
(Mother) Elen wife of John Keenan 1832-1907  
(Sister) Mary E. Keenan 1856-1927

+ John died Nov. 22, 1859 — 15 d.  
Peter died Mar. 27, 1861 aged 13 ds.  
Joseph died Dec. 29, 1870 aged — ds.  
Katie E. died Aug. 16, 1874 — 21 ds.  
Children of J. & Ellen ———

130-C east  
Nellie Tuite 1863-1946

130-C west  
+ Ann wife of John Scully died Dec. 8, 1901 aged 62 years  
John Scully died Feb. 20, 1913, age 87 years  
Ann daughter of C. & S. Murnane born Mar. 22, 1902 died Apr. 12, 1910

131-C west  
[Moran/Rourke monument]
131-C east

132-C east

132-C west
[no record found; no stones]

133-C

134-C


135-C

(To be concluded)